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2011-04

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Center for Homeland Defense and Security

Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/50986>



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Chris Dishman brought back more than souvenirs after a trip to Monterrey in southern Mexico: An idea for a book on what he considers an underappreciated event in American military history.

The result is "A Perfect Gibraltar: The Battle for Monterrey, Mexico 1848," a book outlining the battle for that city during the U.S.-Mexican War.

"I've always been interested in military history, especially the Mexican War," Dishman said by phone. "I think from a military perspective it was one of the most interesting wars in our country's history."

Dishman is a student in the Executive Leaders Program at the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security and works for the Department of Homeland Security Intelligence and Analysis Office as the Southwest Region Director, State and Local Program Office, in McKinney, Texas.



After his jaunt to Monterrey, he immersed himself into the history of the battle by returning for extended periods of times, reading up on the battle and feverishly searching for information, documentation and artifacts of the battle.

"I realized that no book or historian had given the battle its due," Dishman said. "It (the battle) has all the trappings and story lines of a motion picture."

And, he adds, there are lessons and forewarnings for today from the 165-year-old battle.

- The skirmish marked the United States' first experience with urban warfare. The West Point graduates in command did not fight properly in the streets early on in the battle. Texas Rangers, who by necessity had become experienced in street fighting, came to reinforce the troops a couple of days later. The Texas Rangers taught the West Point-educated commanders the finer points of urban war fighting.
- Several names that would figure prominently into Civil War history were present at the Battle for Monterrey. Among them: Ulysses S. Grant, future general and U.S. president, and Jefferson Davis, who would go on to serve as president of the Confederacy.
- Newspaper reporters were embedded with the troops, sending back dispatches to papers around the country. "We think of it as something that just started in the last 10 years, but the first embedded reporters were in Monterrey, though they were on horseback instead of tank," notes Dishman.

The battle resulted in some lessons learned that continue to ring true today. One is adaption, as the West Point graduates who were taught rigid military science were able to alter their approach and use the non-traditional street fighting techniques taught to them by some of the Texas Rangers.

"They adapted out of necessity. I think that theme has big implications for homeland security," Dishman observed.

In some ways the legacy of the battle is still alive today. Recent excavations by Mexican archeologists and historians have turned up U.S. Army skeletons who were buried at the base of the fort during intense fighting on September 21.

"We (the Mexican historians and me) believe that the skeletons excavated belong to soldiers from the Tennessee volunteers, though it is possible they could be Mississippi volunteers or even regulars from the 1st Division,"

Dishman said.

The archeologists are pressed for time because a developer is starting construction on the site in one month and the archeologists will be forced to give up on the dig. Dishman notes that there is no U.S. participation in the dig and he has been trying to drum up support for U.S. involvement.

As an ELP student, Dishman said he enjoys the opportunity to step back from the daily demands of his job and think about homeland security from a broader perspective without the constraint of bureaucracy.

"The ELP gives me an opportunity to think about how the piece I am doing fits into security and to think about other ways of doing things," he said. "Some of the concepts may or may not apply, but it gets you in the mindset of thinking strategically."

"A Perfect Gibraltar" is a finalist of the Army Historical Writers Award. Dishman has set up a Facebook page and a website (www.battleofmonterrey.com) devoted to the book. The site contains additional writings about the battle as well as a video discussing the work.

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